

When Case Studies are Not Enough: A Commentary on the State of Image Repair Research

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Suggested Citation:

Stein, K. A., & Barton M. H. (2023). When case studies are not enough: A commentary on the state of image repair research. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 1(2), 50–53. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10055887>

We are humbled and flattered to be asked by the editor of the *Utah Journal of Communication* to write a foreword to this special issue on *apologia* and *antapologia*. Image repair research was a prominent part of our discipline long before we entered the academy and we suspect it will continue to be the focus of much attention long into the future. As embarrassing, even damaging, as public indiscretions can be, there is no shortage of offenders, each armed with creative strategies for repairing the damage caused by poor decision-making. These “apologists” (though they often use every strategy except to apologize) come from all walks of life. Some are well-known politicians, such as former President Donald Trump explaining his demeaning remarks about women during a private conversation with Access Hollywood’s Billy Bush or former Senator Mark Sanford apologizing for steamy e-mails to his Argentinean mistress. Some are celebrities, like actor Will Smith trying to pick up the pieces of his tattered reputation after slapping Chris Rock at the 2022 Oscars or The Flash star Ezra Miller addressing accusations of sexual abuse

of children. One trend appears constant – athletes, religious leaders, corporate CEOs, media organizations, international leaders, and private citizens are extremely susceptible to reputation damage after making egregious public errors and the general public seems to have an almost insatiable appetite for media coverage of these events.

Our intention here is not to review the many scholarly works that have added to our understanding of persuasive defense, the attacks that precede those image repair efforts, and audience responses to public image repair. However, we would like to identify a few of the important pioneers in *apologia* research, including Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffman, B. L. Ware, Wil Linkugel, Lawrence Rosenfield, Halford Ross Ryan, Sharon Downey, Keith Hearit, Herbert Simons, Ronald Lee, Robert Rowland, John Searle, Noreen Kruse, Michael Cody, Margaret McLaughlin, Emil Towner, and William Benoit. We hope that we have made our own useful contributions to this body of work in our 18 years of collaborating

together, but we recognize our contributions are merely extensions of the great work of others. During this time, we have noticed some interesting trends and would like to share these observations along with a few suggestions for established and burgeoning scholars looking to make a theoretical mark in image repair studies. These include: 1) Case Studies: Purpose and limitations; 2) Exploring the entire speech-set (*kategoria*, *apologia*, *antapologia*); 3) Image repair surrogates; and 4) Pursuing more quantitative studies in image repair.

Case Studies: Purpose and Limitations

We want to begin by addressing the elephant in the room. People are often bored with a straight up analysis of a given scandal using a framework of image repair strategies (usually William's Benoit's more comprehensive list). As one of us (Stein) was mentored by Benoit, we are admittedly sensitive to arguments that might be critical of the work of this great scholar. He is singlehandedly responsible for much of the large wave of enthusiasm that has driven interest in image repair studies for a long time. However, we must also be somewhat practical and open-minded about the reasons people are becoming burned out on image repair studies. There are currently hundreds of articles examining *apologia* by organizations, politicians, nation-states, media figures, athletes, Hollywood celebrities, and private citizens. Image repair is a well-developed "genre" of communication criticism because the same strategies keep emerging over and over, with some subtle differences based on the unique features of the context. Those differences are often not interesting enough to make journal or conference reviewers sit up in their chairs and say, "We have to disseminate these insights widely so people can know what these authors found."

When students in our research classes, particularly our graduate students, express interest in analyzing an image repair case, we suggest they only pursue their research question if they can find a way to make a new theoretical contribution to what we already know. After all, isn't that the purpose of research? One idea we sometimes suggest is to further develop specific categories by exploring the nuances of how that one category functions. We started our essay here with this minor indictment of "cookie cutter" approaches to case study image repair research because the rest of our observations are subsumed under the broader argument that some image repair research is too simplistic and fails to push theoretical boundaries. We have made such an attempt by expanding the framework of mortification to more accurately account for the various ways people employ

that strategy. One of the reasons we targeted mortification is because it is the most commonly used and possibly the least understood. That being said, there are countless scholars doing great work to expand image repair theory and we are not discounting their efforts. We are merely pointing out that the days of straight up case study analysis seem to be over.

Exploring the Entire Speech-Set: *Kategoria*, *Apologia*, & *Antapologia*

Halford Ross Ryan argued that the only way to understand an instance of image repair is to examine it in conjunction with the *kategoria* (attack). We have extended this argument further by suggesting that the speech-set should include more than just attack and defense and added a third component called *antapologia* (responses to *apologia*). It might not be practical for scholars to do a deep dive into the discourse of all three parts of the speech-set in a single paper, but researchers should at least consider the rhetorical constraints that are created with each step. For example, if a local business owner is berated on social media for being unkind to an elderly woman on the subway and the verbal attack contains references to a video recording of the exchange, the business owner is constrained in their *apologia* by not being able to deny the incident occurred. Therefore, there is an important relationship between the *kategoria* and the *apologia*. *Apologia* and *antapologia* are also related in the way that the person offering the image repair will likely craft their strategies based on what they perceive to be the likely response. For example, if a drunk driver runs over a small child, they probably might consider (after they sober up) that minimization (or saying "what I did wasn't that bad") might not be the best strategy since it would infuriate the parents, law enforcement officers, and the community at large. In our observations of existing research in image repair, there could be more substantive evaluation of the attacks preceding the *apologia* and the discursive responses that follow.

Image Repair Surrogates

Researchers have yet to really examine the role of surrogates in image repair. There is a greater focus on surrogates on the attack side, as Benoit argues that surrogates of political candidates are often used to levy the more scathing or personal attacks against opponents. The reason for this is that the candidates fear a voter backlash that could come from being perceived as a mudslinger. Using a surrogate allows for the candidate to hit the opponent without the negative repercussions. Even though surrogates have been used in instances of *apologia* for a long time, scholars rarely pay

attention to their role in repairing image. For example, Jimmy Carter attacked Ronald Reagan in political ads prior to the 1980 campaign. In response, Reagan's wife, Nancy, appeared in an ad defending her husband's character. There were conflicting opinions on the wisdom of this decision, with some speculating it made Reagan look weak. Hired surrogates are also used online to combat armies of trolls by posting positive comments defending the person who hired them (usually CEO's, celebrities, or politicians). Future research on image repair should determine if surrogate strategies differ dramatically from *self-apologia*, which contexts are most appropriate for leaning on surrogates, and whether relying on them is even effective.

Pursuing More Quantitative Studies in Image Repair

Another trend we have noticed is a lack of quantitative studies in image repair. One somewhat superficial way to illustrate this is to do a simple search for image repair and/or *apologia* in the database "Communication and Mass Media Complete." If we only focus our attention on peer-reviewed journal articles, we receive 256 hits. Of these hits, only 12 articles utilize quantitative methods, with the majority of those being content analysis, so they're still focused primarily on message content and structure rather than effects. A question we often get from our students is how scholars can make claims about effectiveness of discourse when we aren't actually measuring it. Our answer is that rhetorical criticism is essentially an argument about how messages are functioning (whether persuasively or ideologically) and we use textual evidences to make claims about whether a certain discourse is effective or not based on message design, plausibility, and consistency with other strategies or themes. We also use external evidence, such as public opinion polls and media commentary to gauge effectiveness. Just like any argument, some are better than others, and we believe that good criticism will provide enough evidence to move the quality of the argument beyond wholly subjective claims and opinion. That being said, there is certainly room in image repair studies to move beyond qualitative claims about effectiveness and actually integrate experiments and surveys to measure whether image repair efforts actually work to restore reputation.

Concluding Thoughts

While we have only taken time to develop a few ideas of where the study of image repair can go, let us provide a list of other ideas that we have started to develop:

- *Apologia* efforts should not be a snapshot of a set of strategies at a set time. Sometimes these offenses follow a rhetor for many years, leaving an undeniable imprint on their character and career. One example was infamous figure skater, Tonya Harding, who initially defended her actions in 1994 and then got another crack at her image repair in 2018 with the release of *I, Tonya*. We explored the ways in which her image repair evolved over time, which provides a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of her strategies (which were inconsistent).
- Not all image repair efforts should be viewed functionally as a mere persuasive "strategy." For example, the rhetoric of reconciliation focuses on healing the situation and the parties involved. Some of the more popular image repair strategies seem superficial in light of the goal of restoring trust and feelings of individual worth. For example, victims of sexual assault are often awarded money by the court system in an effort to "make up" for the damage caused by the perpetrators (e.g. Benoit's strategy of compensation). In reality, though, no monetary offering can ever undue the lifelong trauma resulting from such a horrific offense. Too often, image repair research assumes that restoring reputation should be the ultimate goal rather than other outcomes, such as reconciliation and healing.
- In recent years, *apologia* efforts have been adapted to changing technology. Many of the platforms promote short, superficial, and sensationalized content. Consequently, image repair efforts and media coverage of them seem to be tailored to the audience's palate. For example, YouTube celebrity Laura Lee's overly emotional apology after asserting, "tip for all black people.. if you pull your pants up you can run from the police faster... your welcome" and that Asians could be blindfolded with dental floss reinforced the merger of quick and easily digestible content that has a "hand over your mouth" quality. Research should consider the constraints of the platform as it relates to the construction of the platform and its fit with other versions of the *apologia* in different outlets (e.g. press release or television interviews).
- Offering an "authentic" apology requires more than just well-conceived verbal strategies. Negative perceptions of a rhetor's nonverbal cues during an image repair effort can derail the sincerity or believability of the message. For example, former San Diego Chargers quarterback Ryan Leaf barely apologized for screaming at a local

journalist by reading a prepared statement in a monotone voice, after which he crumpled it up and tossed it into his locker. In this case, it likely wouldn't matter how good the script was because the delivery told the audience everything it needed to know about Leaf's level of contrition. More research could be done to examine the nonverbal components of a public apology.

We hope this discussion will fuel new ideas in image repair research and that other scholars will join us in the pursuit of a more robust understanding of such an everyday genre of discourse.